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ABSTRACT

Issues concerning the language of instruction used in teaching English to native speakers of Chinese, particularly adolescents, are discussed. The discussion draws on research in two areas: the role of language medium in the acquisition of concepts, and psycholinguistic differences between Chinese and English. It is concluded that while the intralingual activities of the language classroom create or simulate a second-language environment, encouraging learner thinking in the second language and providing opportunities for proficiency development, use of both languages can be helpful in achieving intralingual proficiency. The learner works from a reference base in the first language, and can use it to adjust to the second language. In the Chinese context, the native language can be used to present syllabus content, especially when complex psycholinguistics processes are an issue, so the learner may use his existing skill to interpret an item that is exotic to him. However, use of the first language should otherwise be restricted and allowed only as a bridge for acquiring the second language, not as a substitute or equivalent for the target language. Contains 4 references. (MSE)

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Medium of Instruction in the L2 Classroom

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I Introduction

There are different opinions about the use of the native language in the classroom. Some teachers forbid its use, some call on it to occasionally facilitate understanding, and some use it as the usual vehicle for clarifying the meaning. This paper aims to discuss the medium of instruction in the L2 classroom for Chinese adolescent learners. In investigating the use of L1 in the classroom, two aspects should be taken into account: psychological consideration and contrastive linguistics. The discussion in this paper will focus on the psycholinguistic differences.

II The Role of Language Medium in the Acquisition of Concepts

The role of language in thought has been long debated. There are currently two opposing views relating to the degree of dependence of thought upon language, one argues for the independence of thought and language and the other for the dependence of thought upon language. The problem is difficult to resolve because it is impossible to extricate a concept from the words in which it is expressed. However, L2 learning enables us to test concept attainment.

English and Chinese belong to different language families. When we are considering the teaching of English to speakers of other languages, especially Chinese, which is quite different from the English language,

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the impact of the mother tongue upon the acquisition of the target language must always be taken into account. What then are the likely areas of conflict between the two languages? We must certainly not forget the differences in domains of grammar, rhetoric, semantics and pragmatics, which play a very important role with respect to acquisition. However, what I want to consider mostly is the role of language in thought.

In order to make this clearer, we suppose that the process of language production is on a time axis as recommended by McNell's (1987). According to McNell, the speaking time, when words are spoken or written down, is surface time, and the preceding time interval, that is the time of thinking and transformation is deep time. Transformation here refers to the process in which the speaker transforms thinking, which is global and imagistic, into speech, which is segmented and syntactic. In a way, it may be stated that this transformation links two different kinds of thinking, the global and imagistic thinking and the segmented linguistic thinking. The former is closely related to the real world, or to the environment while the latter is closely related to language, which is governed by both rules of grammar and principles of pragmatics. Thus, the language producing process will be as follows:

1. On the part of the speaker, it begins in deep time with transformation from the global and imagistic thinking to the segmented linguistic thinking, and then to the surface time, the production of underlined parole, in which the speaker's ideas become overt in terms of sense and force as expressed by the signifier, speech.

2. On the hearer's side, the opposite happens in the form of decoding: the parole is transformed back into the global and imagistic information in terms of the conversational implications.

3. The process of transformation, or linguistic thinking, is shaped by language, in that the speaker has to reorganise his global and imagistic thinking in terms of the signifiers as they are conventionally constituted within the community of speakers who speak the language. Therefore, while the linguistic communication itself is individual and motivated and controlled by the individual

speaker, there must be something that is common to or shared by the community of speakers.

4. As language is usually acquired from childhood, and is conventional among the community of speakers, it will produce a king of linguistic routine in relation to the rules of grammar and principles of pragmatics. This linguistic routine may be identified with psycholinguistic patterns which underlie language performance in the following ways: 1) the way the target is segmented, and labelled 2) the way the segmented items are sequenced 3) the way the sequences are related to the communicative goals.

5. These psycholinguistic patterns are consistent within the community of speakers who speak the language and they work subconsciously rather than consciously. However, when we take the case of an individual speaker into consideration, his/her behaviour may not necessarily be entirely consistent with the whole set of conventions within or pertaining to the language, as there are determined by the rules of grammar and principles of pragmatics, but only with some of these convention which may even be altered.

So what happens to Chinese learners when they learn English as a second language? The fact is that, on the one hand, if they wish to communicate a concept for which they have a direct label, they can take advantage of the label to construct a direct representation. On the other hand, if they wish to communicate a concept for which they haven't got a direct label, they will have top translate the intended concept into a description composed of Chinese communication concepts. For example, English speakers make use of the subjunctive mood to express a counterfactual event, whereas, Chinese does not have a subjunctive mood. Thus, in a situation in which it is known that Mr. Chang has no car, the Chinese speaker is likely to say "If Mr. Chang has a car, he can visit us." instead of "If Mr. Chang had a car, he could visit us." This indicates that if a language has a specific label for a given concept, the hearer or reader's intended concept as a cognitive perspective is effectively assured whereas if the label is not available, the hearer and reader must rely on other cognitive perspectives and move towards the intended one. This agrees with Bloom's (1986) hypothesis which is

stated as follows: "As a consequence, one might expect that he or she might, on the road to arriving at the intended concept, A) tend to draw upon considerations which a direct triggering of the concept would act to preclude and B) be more vulnerable to distractions which may even derail him/her from the intended result."

We can see that the relation between words and thought is not only considered as signified/signifier but a cognitive activity as well. In addition, in the L2 situation the learners use L1 for a reference, and to that extent they tend to transfer rules, habits and meaning from their mother tongue. Therefore, in order to reduce the impact of the mother tongue upon L2 learning, the use of the target language for instruction in the L2 classroom is very important. The activities performed in the target language in classroom will create or stimulate an L2 environment. They encourage the learners to think in the second language and avoid the learners relying too much on L1 support, so that the learners will develop a new independent network of L2 verbal connections.

III PSYCHOLINGUISTIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ENGLISH AND CHINESE

Now, in a bilingual situation, especially in foreign language learning, the learner may not have completely mastered the language system he is using, and he is by no means in possession of the psycholinguistic patterns to guide him subconsciously. Instead he may simply follow the pattern he is familiar with, but he may never become aware of that, except to the extent that he often may find himself embarrassed by the wrong utterances he/she produces. Clearly, this indicates that learning a language means not only the acquisition of a complete system of linguistic symbols, and the rules of grammar and the principles of pragmatics, but also the acquisition of certain habits, that is the psycholinguistic pattern that underlies the language. This may also help explain the fact that many Chinese people speak English with strong Chinese characteristics and modes of behavior, that is, they subconsciously replace the signifier of the English language with that of the Chinese language. In doing this, they produce mistakes at the level of grammar, or even when they do compose a correct sentence in terms of syntax or semantics, they may still make mistakes in rhetoric.

As to the question of whether this kind of difference really exists, it may be stated that Chinese treats everything with a broad view and within a broader content, whereas English treats everything as strictly labelled and logically related, as compared with Chinese. This certainly does not mean that Chinese lacks logic, in view of the fact that it has fostered a cultural heritage of unmatched beauty and unique richness, but it is different in a way from that of English. A few examples will suffice to show what I have in mind.

First, at the level of the categorisation, or the form of the noun phrase, English employs a parameter boundary by using the indefinite article *a* or *an*. It can be shown in the contrast between a series of NPs with *a/an* and another with zero, e.g. *a desk, a tree, a story* in contrast to *water, iron, information* and so on. Here we can see two different structures: *a/an + N* and *O + N*, and we can see from the series above that the signifier of the words that can be said with *a/an*, has one thing in common, that they all have a kind of boundary, i.e. a definite shape, beginning and end, length and all kinds of limits that make a countable noun. Whereas, those that do not have *a/an*, are all signifiers of something that is not concrete in itself. They usually require other means to make them concrete, e.g. a piece of iron and a piece of information.

Now let us consider the case in Chinese. Certainly, there is no concrete system of determiners in the Chinese language. Although Chinese can also say *Yi kuai* tie "a piece of iron" and *Yi tiao xiaoxi* "a piece of information" and so on, they do not make any contrast between them and expressions such as *Yi ge gushi* "a story", *Yi tiao yu* "a fish", and so on.

Because of the contrast made by the parameter of boundary, English is able to separate such ideas in such phrases or expressions as *a work*, which means a concrete object, the product of the work of a writer or an author, and *He is at table*, which indicates something related to the sense of a table but not referred to the table. Certainly, this is impossible in Chinese, as there is never any requirement when naming something to consider whether it has or has not a boundary.

Secondly, there is a clear division between nouns, adjectives and adverbs when they are used as modifiers or productively in English. This, too, creates a division in the linguistic thinking that is related to different facets of sense/meaning related to the same object, for example, the contrast between *happy* and *happiness*, and so on. In Chinese, there is no simple form that can make a distinction between the state of being happy, which can be observed, and happiness, which can only be perceived through reasoning. That is to say, there is no distinction between the noun and adjective form in Chinese.

The last example I want to present here is about the Topic and Information sequence which can be clearly seen in discourse analysis. That is, when producing a sentence/an utterance, in English, one will probably utter a group of sound images which signifies the topic in question, and then state the information one wants to provide on the topic. This is most clearly seen in the case of a passive construction, i.e. one may say *The boy broke the glass*, or *The glass was broken by the boy*. The difference between these two sentences is that the topics in question are different, the former is concentrated on the boy while the latter is concentrated on the glass. This is also not a distinction usually made in Chinese.

Let's bear in mind that the learners in this case are Chinese adolescents who have missed out on 'the golden period' of early childhood for acquiring English. From what has been said so far it can't be denied that they learn English from a Chinese viewpoint and, therefore, whether they like or not, they learn English on the basis of Chinese. Meanwhile, they approach the study of a new society with a different culture and they have to think of ways in which they will personally deal with the Chinese-English connection. Thus, when the explanation and definition given in the target language fails to make the learners understand various concepts, the mother tongue can he employed as a medium of instruction in the L2 classroom, which will give support to learners in their attempts to achieve better comprehension.

IV CONCLUSION

We have discussed the role of language in thought and the psycholinguistic differences between English and Chinese. English and

Chinese differ in many respects. If proficiency is the goal of language teaching, then, the learners will improve their ability to master the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing or if communicative competence is the goal they will concentrate on improving their intralingual or crosslingual skills?

The intralingual activities of the language classroom create or simulate an L2 environment. They encourage learners' thinking in the second language. Intralingual techniques clearly provide opportunities for proficiency development. However, this does not mean that crosslingual procedures at all times are unhelpful in achieving an intralingual proficiency objective. As we have seen above, the learner inevitably works from an L1 reference base, but it can be helpful for him to adjust himself in the L2 through the medium of L1.

As for the medium of instruction in the L2 classroom, in the present case (Chinese learners), the mother tongue may be employed in the presentation of the teaching syllabus, especially for the adolescents and in cases of difficult items where complicated psycholinguistic processes are at work which are so very different from one language to the other. The reason is that after all the learner will use his own pattern in interpreting the item that is exotic to him, so that mistakes may be avoided if there is a better chance of being clearly understood.

However, the use of the mother tongue must be somewhat restricted, so that learners will concentrate their attention on the target language, so that they will only use their mother tongue as a bridge in acquiring the target language, not as a substitute or an equivalent to the signifiers of the target language. It is difficult to recreate the real-world in the classroom, but it is extremely important to at least create a language environment so as to help the learners to improve the four skills. Thus, teachers (non-native speakers) are encouraged to use the target language as much as possible as a medium of instruction in L2 classroom.

Of course, both teachers (non-native speakers) and learners will make mistakes when they communicate with one another in the target language. There is nothing strange about this within the context/process of language learning. The non-native teachers should have confidence

in using the target language as much as possible as a medium of instruction. As Little (1985) suggests,

> First, teachers are often more competent in the target language than they think; and daily practice can only increase their competence. Secondly, it is infinitely more important to maximum learners' receptive and productive use of the target language than to protect them from deficiencies in the teacher's competence in that language. Thirdly, communicative learning materials and activities should be anchored in a large corpus of authentic texts in the target language, and these texts will more than counterbalance any adverse effects that deficiencies in the teacher's target language competence may have. (p.26)

To sum up, the use of the target language as a medium of instruction in the L2 classroom is an efficient way to achieve proficiency in the target language. Because of the psycholinguistic differences between English and Chinese, the sole use of the target language as a medium of instruction is not always feasible. Hence, the mother tongue can be employed in the L2 classroom. But the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction must be strictly controlled, so that the learners will concentrate their attention on the target language and rely less on L1 support. The proper use of L2 and L1 as the medium of instruction in L2 classroom will certainly make the teaching of second language more effective.

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